

ST. NICHOLAS:

AN

ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE

FOR YOUNG FOLKS.

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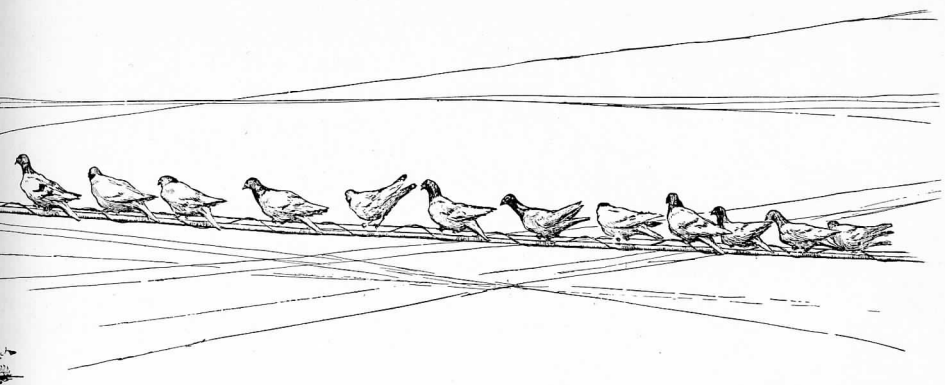
MARY MAPES DODGE.

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CARRIER-PIGEONS OF SANTA CATALINA.

BY DEWITT C. LOCKWOOD.

SOME twenty miles off the coast of southern California lies the island of Santa Catalina. On the maps it is shaped somewhat like a giant's footprint. From the mainland it appears to be an exquisite blue cloud, floating lightly and gracefully on the water.

Approaching the island we find it to consist of a very substantial mass of mountain peaks, more or less waving elevations, and green cañons; the coast-line is bordered with verdure-covered knolls which slip gently into the sea, and with cliffs and precipices which rise for a hundred feet or more. Here and there, between the cliffs and knolls, are to be found the most charming half-moon bays and dimly light valleys; and in one of these valleys lies the quaint little town of Avalon—the favorite resort of southern California.

Except on special occasions a single steamer may daily be the only regular means of going to and from this isle of the Pacific, and there is no cable to send messages. Thus, in the electrical day and generation, there was a time when of from 3000 to 5000 people at sea, in many ways than one, since they were without means of getting word to or from the mainland twenty-four hours at a time!

Some little mite of royalty should get the

mumps or the measles, in less than sixty minutes the entire civilized world might know it, but Catalina island, just off the California coast, might then have sunk with all on board some foggy morning, and not a living soul would have known anything about it for a whole day afterward!

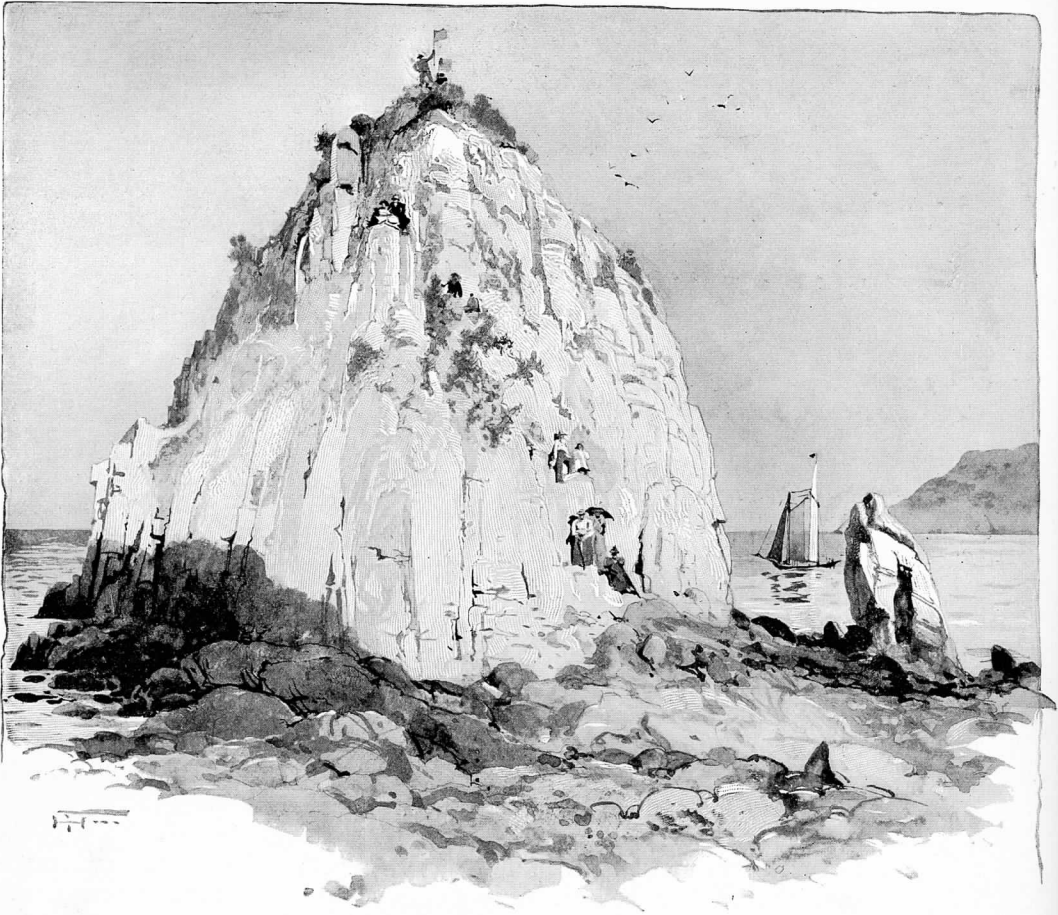
Sometimes the situation which confronted the island visitor, as in the event of accident or sudden illness, was a serious one indeed, while the inconveniences and annoyances to which nearly everybody at one time or another was subject were almost limitless.

How often would one hear exclamations such as these: "Oh, dear! there goes the boat, and I never thought to send word to Robby to be sure and bring his overcoat. The evenings are so very cool now, he'll catch his death of cold!" "I'd give five hundred dollars," declared a gentleman well known in the financial world, "if there was any way of getting word to Los Angeles before three o'clock this afternoon."

Such was the condition of affairs when, one morning, two enterprising lads in Los Angeles were discussing the situation.

"Why not carrier-pigeons?" said one.

It was an inspiration. The face of the other grew radiant, while two words of Sanscrit or some occult tongue escaped his lips. They were: "Gee whiz!"—and the thing was as good as done.



SUGAR LOAF, AVALON, SANTA CATALINA ISLAND, CALIFORNIA. FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BEST & CO., LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

The boys had already been interested in the pigeon industry, and so began at once the system of training necessary to render a certain number of their birds available message-bearers to and from Catalina island.

"How do you fasten the message to the bird?"

"Will the same pigeon fly both ways?"

"Why do you fasten that bit of paper to his tail?"

"How do you get the message from the bird? Does he bring it to you?"

"Does n't the pigeon ever pick the message off?"

"Won't any kind of a pigeon do for a carrier?"

"Don't they get very tired going so far?"

"Oh, look at that funny little ring on his leg! What is that for?"

Well, the variety of questions asked by the spectators from day to day, when the birds were about to be liberated, would certainly fill a half-dozen pages of *St. NICHOLAS*.

It is quite impossible to answer here even a generous proportion of these inquiries, or of those that will naturally occur to many of my readers who may be unfamiliar with the habits of the intelligent "homer."

It must be understood, however, that in certain pigeons, especially those known as the Belgian variety, the homing instinct is developed in a remarkable degree; and it is the birds' intense love of home, and the almost unvarying certainty of their return thither after having been taken some distance away, and then released, which make them valuable as carriers.

The methods used in training a pigeon for

special service are not by any means similar, as many people seem to think, to those employed in teaching a dog to run after a stick, or a white-spotted pony to dance the polka. A carrier's education consists in conveying him away from home, and letting him go, when he simply flies back to the loft where he belongs.

This sounds almost as thrilling as the story of the enterprising mouse that first ran up the clock, and then ran down again; and of course it conveys no idea of the immense amount of care and patience involved in the rearing and

of a two-bit piece—a quarter of a dollar. Then they were carried to a spot a mile or so from the loft, in a direct line for the coast and Catalina, and released. A few days later, the same birds were taken a greater distance away, —say three or four miles from home, and liberated. In this manner the several succeeding journeys were gradually lengthened until San Pedro, the seaport of Los Angeles, twenty-two miles distant, was reached.

Then the pigeons were taken aboard the steamer, and set at liberty a few miles out at



AVALON. SANTA CATALINA.

breeding of the birds—the special cultivation of those qualities which produce the best results, and so on.

In training the birds for Catalina, three or four were usually placed together in a pasteboard box, perforated with holes about the size

sea, increasing the distance upon the four occasions that followed, until at last the end of the route was reached, and the birds would fly, without fail, across the sea and over the land to their home.

While these birds were taking their first les-

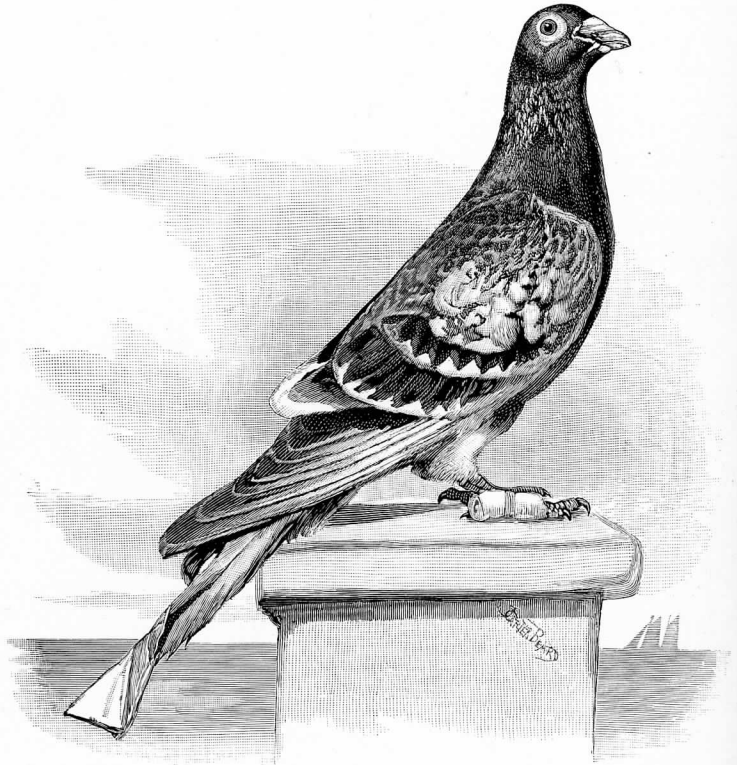
sons in geography, another set was being domesticated on Catalina, and later were taught by the same process to convey messages the other way—that is, from Los Angeles to Avalon.

The message, when sent by the Catalina carriers, is always written on sheets of tissue-paper four inches wide and ten inches long. Four of these slips will contain enough written matter to fill a column or more of an ordinary daily paper, by which it will be seen that the birds can carry a very considerable amount of correspondence. It may be interesting to know that during the Franco-German war, when large numbers of carrier-pigeons were employed with great success, the messages were printed by microphotography on fine, waterproof films, by which method an almost incredible amount of correspondence could be forwarded by a single bird. According to a French newspaper, nearly two million despatches were carried by pigeons during the siege. The birds were taken out of Paris in balloons.

There are various methods of attaching the message. After folding the written slips together lengthwise in the middle, then over and over three or four times, the whole may be rolled up tightly into a drum-shaped pellet, secured with a bit of twine, and then tied to the bird's leg; or else the narrow folded slips may be wound round and round the leg, exactly as you would apply a bandage to a sore finger. Sometimes the message is attached to the wing or tail feathers, or fastened about the body of the bird, but not always with the best results.

The well-known figure, on certain valentines, of a huge envelope with "Love to Thee" inscribed thereon, the whole tied about the neck

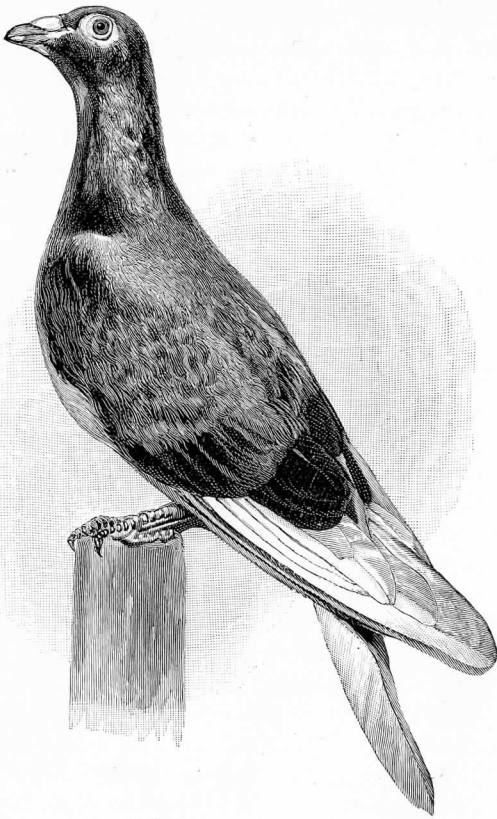
of a dove with a yard or more, apparently, of pale blue ribbon, is undoubtedly responsible for the prevailing belief that this method is the one generally employed. It was no uncommon thing to have a man rush into the office with a yellow envelope, duly sealed and addressed, almost as large as the pigeon itself, expecting the bird to carry it (in his beak, probably) across



ORLANDO.

the channel. After a few experiences of this kind, the boys were not at all surprised when somebody wanted to know if he could get a bird to take over an umbrella for him.

The first message-bearer despatched from the island was "Orlando." All the birds have names, of which something will be said later. Orlando is certainly a fine specimen of a homing pigeon. He is a dark bluish gray in color, with white-spotted wings, and an iridescent metallic luster on the neck, changing in the light to coppery, purplish red. In short, he is what is known in "pigeon English" as a "blue checker." By grasping him firmly around



VESTA.

was fine they usually started for the opposite shore without delay; but if the mainland was obscured in fog they always circled about the town, rising higher and higher, until they were able to peer over the fog-bank, and thus determine the direction in which their food and shelter and comrades lay.

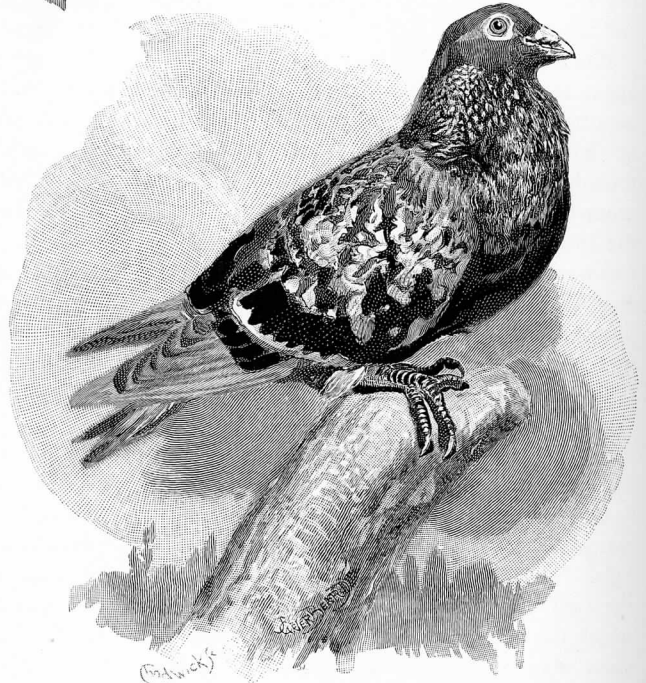
It was very seldom that a messenger was despatched alone. There is danger of attacks from hawks, and a hawk will not molest two or more pigeons traveling in company.

For nearly three months, always once, and sometimes three and four times, per day, as the demand for private messages required, the carrier-pigeons were despatched from Catalina, and with such success that the service will be renewed

this year. The steamer left Avalon at 8 A. M., and about the middle of the afternoon a chronicle of the day's events was sent over by the birds, and published the following morning in a Los Angeles paper.

Once only the messengers refused to go. This was about the time of the great railroad strikes, and of course somebody had to suggest that the birds had joined the union. They started off promptly, went out for half a mile or so, and then, to the amazement of all, suddenly veered round and returned to the loft on the wharf. It proved afterward that a curious electric storm was in progress at the time, in the region round about Los Angeles, and the intelligent homers wisely concluded to take no chances. The next day the same birds were despatched, and went off "without a word."

Every youngster in either loft is duly numbered as soon as he is able to stand alone. The number, with the initials of the bird's owner, is stamped on a little brass ring, which is clasped about the pigeon's leg. Each number refers to a corresponding one in a register which records the date of hatching, pedigree, description, and so forth, of each pigeon.



FAT SAM.

The birds are provided with names, more or less appropriate, as soon as they are qualified to become members of the service. Naturally many Spanish names are employed, such as "Del Mar" (of the sea), "Hermosa" (beautiful), "La Paloma" (the dove), "Ventura" (luck, fortune).

Birds of a decided reddish hue are known as "Red Hawk," "Red Racer," etc. A beautiful creature with a glossy coat of silver which has a fine record for speed came naturally by the name of "Quicksilver." A daughter of the celebrated Philadelphia flyer "Theo," and a son of a famous homer from the late Geo. W. Childs's loft are called "Miss Theo," and "G. W. Childs, Jr." "Sugar Loaf" was named from a familiar point at Avalon, and "Black Jack" from one of Catalina's highest mountains. Other names include "Fleetwing," "Whitewings," "Flying Jib," etc.

"Fat Sam" belongs to one of the first families of Antwerp and ought to have been a credit to the loft. It was quite bad enough when he used to come in an hour or so behind the others, but when he made a practice of being from twenty-four to thirty-six hours late, and once took a whole month's vacation right in the busiest season, his career as a messenger came to an end. He is now retained in the loft as a sort of curio, and is not by any means entitled to one half the attention he receives.

"Rags" is a "natural born" tramp. He always comes in covered with dust as though he had plodded along in the middle of the road half the way from San Pedro.

"Blue Jim," a beautiful dark purplish bird, and one of the swiftest messengers, was shot while *en route* by some careless sportsman.

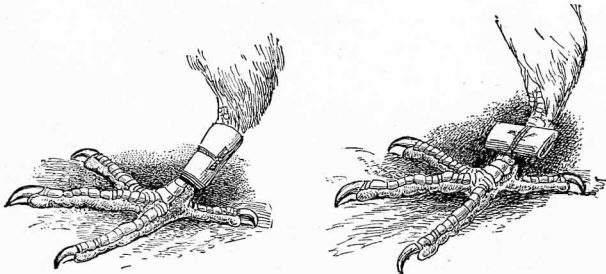
Blue Jim's untimely end recalls the sad fate of a couple of carriers which a fancier, while waiting at a hotel for his dinner, left in charge of the landlord. The meal was duly served and proved to be very enjoyable, especially a savory fricassee. The man paid his bill and then inquired for his pigeons.

"Your pigeons?" exclaimed the landlord in astonishment. "Why, sir, you have just eaten them!"

Sometimes, as in the case of children who fail to live up to their names, there occurs a palpable misfit. "Vesta," for instance, was a beautiful youngster, alert and graceful as one could desire. She was of an exquisite terracotta hue, such as might have been produced by the light of the sacred fire which was watched over and tended so faithfully by the vestals of ancient Rome.

But as the goddess's namesake grew older she became careless of her personal appearance, and now her feathers are always askew, and her lack of interest in the subject most deplorable. While her comrades are carefully preening themselves upon returning from the trip, as every well-bred pigeon should do, she appears to regard the proceeding with the utmost disdain.

"Vesta" was once given up for lost. But one day, nearly three weeks after her departure from Catalina, she appeared at the home loft with both wings clipped to the bone. She certainly had never looked more untidy or more full of glee. How she had been entrapped, why and by whom her wings had been clipped — all the details of her slow, toilsome journey, which must have been replete with thrilling feather-breadth escapes, would doubtless make a most exciting story, but there is no likelihood that her adventures will ever be known.



METHODS OF ATTACHING MESSAGES.